

# For immediate release

## Schools must be the last to close and the first to open

**January 4, 2022**

We note with concern, that governments are considering or planning school closure as Covid cases are on the rise. Delhi, Goa and Haryana governments have ordered school closure. Karnataka TAC has recommended a TPR of 2% to close schools and colleges. This will spell a disaster for children.

Schools have recently opened after remaining mostly closed since March 2020, with devastating consequences for the nutrition, health and education of hundreds of thousands of children. Child labour, early marriages, domestic violence has increased. It is evident that the absence of structured learning opportunities has caused severe academic regression, young children have forgotten habits of learning; basic reading and numeracy skills have been affected, and we are seeing a huge dropout as a result. Online education has not been possible or pedagogically meaningful for most children. It will continue to be a meaningless 'option'.

The evidence from Karnataka and elsewhere across the world is that young children and adolescents are least vulnerable to the Covid virus; they are more commonly asymptomatic or have mild non-specific symptoms, and fatalities are negligible. Scientific studies have shown that in-school transmission of the virus by children or teachers is lower compared to other locations; such transmission can be lowered by taking normal public health precautions, including reasonable distancing, wearing masks, sanitizing and isolating/ treating students and teachers with symptoms.

Political leaders have been repeatedly insisting that they would go by scientific principles and reasoning, and consider the costs of lockdown as well. This means we need to make meaningful estimate of the costs of lockdown. While the economic costs of lockdown are now being considered by many, the educational costs of condemning entire generations of children to a life time of illiteracy and ignorance is being taken lightly and even callously.

When we compare the enormous harm arising from keeping schools closed with the much lesser harm from opening schools, it seems clear that schools must stay open. Across the world, schools have been mostly kept open, in some countries even throughout the pandemic. The evidence from South Africa and Europe confirms that there is no indication that the third wave is targeting children, which the head of Indian Council of Medical Research has also emphasized earlier.

A large number of schools in rural areas have an enrollment of less than 50. Children who come to these schools are in many cases, in the same bubble in the community and already playing with one another outside their homes. There is absolutely no justification in closing them.

Governments are now seeing the wisdom of graded response to pandemic waves, this will mean that initially large schools, schools in urban settings may be asked to operate at 50% capacity ensuring distancing and masking, if the TPR crosses, say, 5%. If the TPR crosses 10%, medium

sized schools can be asked to operate in shifts/ use staggered timings to ensure distancing / lack of crowding. Schools which are small should not be closed, evidence suggests that students are safer in schools than in the community. Hot cooked meals must continue to be made available in all schools. If schools are closed, provision for hot cooked meals must be made at the community level as occasional supply of dry rations has not been adequate to respond to malnutrition, itself an aggravator of poor health.

Decisions on opening and phasing must be made by the district and taluka administration, and under guidelines issued by the state and central governments, for greater flexibility. When cases are detected, immediate steps must be taken locally for containment and medical attention. If TPR is high in one gram panchayat, schools in other panchayats which show low TPR need not be closed. Only if there are large number of severe cases affecting children should wide spread school closure be considered. Asymptomatic cases of children should not be a factor for considering school closure. Most teachers have already been vaccinated. Teachers should be in schools and not be deployed for Covid related tasks, for which governments should make alternate arrangements. Tamil Nadu for instance has deployed paid youth volunteers for community related activities instead of deploying teachers.

In-person attendance should be encouraged but not made compulsory, so that parents who do not want to send their children, are not forced to. Data on cases disaggregated by age, location, severity must be available on a daily basis.

Schools must take adequate precautions, providing water and soap to ensure hygiene, with masks and reasonable physical distancing. Classes should be conducted in the open wherever possible, or in well ventilated rooms.

**Complete lock down has severely affected our economy and jobs earlier. School lock down will similarly seriously harm our children, and that too, over the long term. Keeping schools open is necessary to reduce this serious harm and resume the processes of learning. Schools must be the last to close and the first to open!**

**- National Coalition on the Education Emergency**

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